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Desiring Blackness:  
A Queer Orientation to Marvel's  
*Black Panther*, 1998–2016

**Abstract** The socially symbolic figure of the superhero comes into close contact with vernacular intellectual critiques of race and modernity through the much-anticipated film adaptation of Marvel's *Black Panther* comics. This article analyzes the implications for queer approaches to black popular cultural production of the knowledge practices that inspire *Black Panther*'s depiction of an African utopia. The intertexts involved include histories, travel writings, and other comics. Focusing on the divergent treatments by authors Christopher Priest (1998–2003) and Ta-Nehisi Coates (2016) of the title character's black female comrades-in-arms, this reading interrogates how race consciousness and colonial legacies inform the discourses of desire operating within the text. The term *desiring blackness* describes an orientation to reading that defers to African Americanist and black diasporic considerations to ground the task of interpretation in conditions that elicit compromise among disparate lines of theoretical inquiry: queer phenomenology, decolonial epistemology, Afrofuturism, and queer of color critique.

**Keywords** comics, utopia, diaspora, African American studies, queer theory, nationalism

The passionate attachment that often characterizes black and queer orientations to cultural texts can teach us many things. With respect to the role of desire in interpretation, the stories told in comic books prove instructive through their continual reappearance in new forms to appeal to the attitudes of different segments of the reading public. The film adaptation of Marvel's *Black Panther* comics (newly released as of this writing) certainly promises to expand the range of persons implicated in interpreting the set of texts that provide its content. Importantly, this media event also marshals the labors of a considerable number of visibly black persons—actors and filmmakers—whom the viewing audience already regards with

*American Literature*, Volume 90, Number 2, June 2018  
DOI 10.1215/00029831-4564286 © 2018 by Duke University Press

some combination of affective dispositions, intellectual interests, and indifference. Familiarity with the prior textual constructions of the film's protagonists heightens my curiosity about how the critical priorities we bring to comics are informed by the anteriority of our relationship to blackness. As a discussion of what is queer about comics emerges in the watershed of a particularly black moment in the production of narratives derived from the medium, it seems fitting to ask what we expect and what we desire in relation to comics in explicitly race-conscious terms.

Some of the persons responsible for the proliferating images of the Black Panther in print and other media include writers Christopher Priest, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Roxane Gay, and Yona Harvey; artists Brian Stelfreeze, M. D. Bright, Alitha Martinez, and Afua Richardson; the late comics and animation innovator Dwayne McDuffie; filmmakers Reginald Hudlin and Ryan Coogler; actors Chadwick Boseman and Djimon Hounsou; and the character's creators, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. In this discussion, I focus on the comic book series written by Priest from 1998 to 2003 and the first several issues of the most recent series authored by Coates in 2016, because their contributions to the past half-century of *Black Panther's* textual history play an outsize role in its current reception.

The spectacle of black performance and interpretation accruing to this set of texts will undoubtedly garner renewed attention to the politics of black popular media from all quarters. Before this resurgence, I want to inflect the critical lexicon with a greater awareness of the degree to which the *Black Panther* phenomenon is already situated in a dense network of desiring practices. Heightening this awareness is necessary in order to forestall habits of critical description that circumscribe black textual practices within (racially) unmarked knowledge formations. In the past, such categorical gestures have underestimated the difference between black Marxism and historical materialisms that treat racial identity as epiphenomenal to class (Robinson 2000); they have misrecognized black feminist mobilizations as inimical to black liberation and women's emancipation (Harris 2011); and they have marginalized black artistic responses to the changing conditions of modernity in accounts of modernism and postmodernism (Harper 1994; Dickson-Carr 2013).

In venues like this special issue, queer studies prides itself on overcoming disciplinary preoccupations that eclipse the centrality of race to the construction of sexuality, gender, and its other objects of inquiry (Harper et al. 1997; Duggan 2015). Accordingly, in this article, I argue

that reckoning with what is black about this particular comics text is a corequisite for posing the question of what is queer about comics. Facing what is black about the way in which certain comics are queer is a practice of *orientation*. In Sara Ahmed's (2006, 545) words, accounting for our orientation toward objects entails acknowledging how "the world that is around us has already taken certain shapes, as the very form of what is more and less familiar." Habituating ourselves with the distinctly racial attachments of the text is one way to counter what Ernesto Javier Martínez (2013, 116) refers to as the "muted sociality of queerness," which predisposes us to ascribe queerness to that which transgresses familiar arrangements of identity and desire more often than we perceive it in intragroup (e.g., intraracial) terms. Emphasizing the social, intersubjective quality of "queer" over its individuating dimensions enables critical observers to recognize "that queer experiences are actually *coproduced and shared* by larger collectives (even though these collectives often deny their own implicatedness in queer sociality). It also provides an unusually in-depth reminder that some nonqueer people actually work to resist the logic of social fragmentation mandated by homophobic societies and that they do so, at times, by bearing 'faithful witness' to acts of queer social resistance—even when it is dangerous to do so" (16). Recognizing how collective practices constitute queer subjects reminds us that "queer does not have a relation of exteriority to that with which it comes into contact" (Ahmed 2006, 544). Owing to the work that "non-queer" authors and audiences have done to bring *Black Panther* to prominence, we ought to acknowledge that the implications of developments in black popular culture for queer criticism are entangled with the internal dynamics of black cultural politics.

My effort to preempt queer readings of *Black Panther* arises out of a learned vigilance toward the silencing that can take place when disparate intellectual traditions meet on the plane of popular controversy. For *Black Panther*, the stage for assessments of what is queer about comics has been set by recent interventions in critical theory concerned with epistemic violence around questions of race. The concept of epistemic violence harks back to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's radical question, "Can the subaltern speak?" and its corollary, "Can the hegemonic ear hear anything?" (Barrett 2004, 359). According to another feminist philosopher of language, Kristie Dotson, epistemic violence is the silencing we experience when our interlocutors fail, intentionally or otherwise, "to communicatively reciprocate a linguistic

exchange owing to pernicious ignorance. . . . *Pernicious ignorance* should be understood to refer to any reliable ignorance . . . that is *consistent* or follows from a predictable epistemic gap” (Dotson 2011, 238).

Critics concerned with the epistemic gaps that result in pernicious ignorance highlight how they are reproduced through institutional and quotidian practices (Outlaw 2007). At best, such practices disregard the nuance that closer attention to marginalized knowledge traditions might yield. But the cumulative impact of silencing marginal texts and repertoires is the subjugation of vital ways of knowing and being in the world (Taylor 2003). These subjugating effects occur when the inauguration of a school of thought, such as new materialism or the posthuman turn, claims to discover phenomena “familiar to, among others, First Nations and Indigenous peoples; to those humans who have never been quite human enough” (Tompkins 2016). They occur when overweening suspicion about the totalizing tendencies of colonial modernity effaces the multiplicity of logics, universalisms, and modernities envisioned among colonized peoples (Mbembe 2003; Quijano 2007). Queer studies is not immune to this predicament. For example, out of a sensitivity to transnational capitalism, some critics trace the articulation of new sexual economies and gender expressions in the global South to US and European influences propagated by globalization; this occludes the more complex genealogies of local sex cultures undergoing transformation (Jackson 2009).

As black scholars have enhanced our focus on sexuality over time, our concerns have converged with queer studies, but we draw from different foundations. Significant cultural production by black lesbian, feminist, gay, and gender-nonconforming activists and artists in the 1980s and 1990s addressed sexuality as a factor in the construction of racial difference and social inequality (Johnson 2014). Yet the provenance of these works—their publication, often by nonacademic presses, alongside poetry and pornography—consigned them to the periphery of the emergent queer studies canon (Macharia 2014). As Roderick A. Ferguson (2012, 224) writes, “Understanding the procedures by which queerness is brought into the administrative ethos means that we have to both comprehend the administrative management of race and gender and theorize the relation of those forms of difference to queerness as an administrative object.” As we institutionalize the priorities of black and queer constituencies through academic inquiry, we ought to interrogate continually what textuality and visibility have meant for the way our desires are represented in the popular imagination.

In order to maintain a relation of reciprocity with the intellectual prerogatives that make texts like *Black Panther* legible, queer theorizations of black popular culture must undo the effects of “insistent and profound ignorance of people of color, even in the twenty-first century” (Holland 2014, 804). In the interpretation of *Black Panther* comics that follows, I forward the notion that blackness comprises a “cathectic and world-making” apparatus that is indispensable to understanding the cultural politics of African American popular texts.<sup>1</sup> By offering an orientation to the discourses of desire that inform *Black Panther*’s fabulations, I will illustrate how black and queer critical idioms might speak to one another’s respective and mutual interests in the construction of identity, space, and modernity, as well as gender and sexuality.

I posit the present discussion as an instructional gesture toward the incipient queer readings that will attend the explosion of *Black Panther* texts in the years to come. I employ the term *desiring blackness* with an appreciation for its resonance with a similar formulation coined by Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman (2012, 158), who asserts that “there is always already something queer about blackness.” My analysis takes exception to this axiom. Rather than presuming that queerness is emerging in a new, black form on the cultural landscape, I aim to orient readers to habits of desiring inscribed in black textuality that should be of interest even if they may never “touch” queerness (Muñoz 2009, 1).

The rhetoric of desiring, rather than defining, what blackness is or what it means emphasizes what blackness *does* and what we, as readers, do in relation to it. Focusing on two formative moments in the textual corpus, I outline the tasks of desiring blackness in *Black Panther* comics in three stages. First, I discuss how a succession of writers approach a signature trope in *Black Panther* to construct a sexual politics that resists overdetermination by race. Subsequently, I take stock of the geopolitical references grounding *Black Panther*’s countermythology, and I argue that its imaginative reinvention of Pan-African and black nationalist agendas holds felicitous potential for queer readers. Ultimately, these dynamics suggest that a dialogue between queer studies and comics will be made more resourceful by desiring blackness: attending to the demands blackness places on interpretation.

### Adored Ones

The most recognizable departure from convention in the new *Black Panther* comics by Coates is a lesbian relationship between prominent



Figure 1 From Coates and Stelfreeze (2016), *Black Panther* #1

characters (see fig. 1). The silhouette of two women's heads backlit by a roaring fire in the first issue of Coates and Stelfreeze's series symbolizes both the characters' sexual passion and the stark contrasts communicated by their dialogue. As the shadows of their faces become one against the fire, they speak of themselves as "dead women," in light of their decision to reverse their prior commitments and start a rebellion against the Black Panther. Coates introduces this development in order to revisit a feature of the text inherited from Priest's era. To characterize the dilemma posed by his predecessors' treatment of sexuality, Coates gestures toward the desire to find grounding in history encoded in each iteration of the narrative. Whereas his explanation refers to plot developments that take place between Priest's tenure as writer of the series and Coates's own, I will go on to suggest that both authors are contending with fundamental quandaries posed by the endeavor to portray the setting of the text as both utopian and African.

The female characters engaged in a kiss in the pages of *Black Panther* #1 (Coates and Stelfreeze 2016) are Aneka and Ayo, members of

the all-female elite military force that the hero relies on to secure his person and maintain the peace in the fictionalized African nation of Wakanda, where T'Challa, the Black Panther, reigns. This feature of the comics originated with Priest in 1998. Priest's introduction of the all-female elite bodyguards, whom he named the Dora Milaje, a moniker to which he assigned the pseudotranslation "Adored Ones," left a troubling legacy for future writers. The Dora Milaje were central to Priest's first storyline as author of the *Black Panther* series (Priest and Bright 2000). He depicted the women warriors as wives-in-waiting for the Black Panther; they spoke only to him and addressed him as "Beloved." Because tradition prevents the hero from ever consummating his relationship with a member of the Dora Milaje, a pitched conflict ensues when one of their number seeks to win his love. The lovesick erstwhile devotee, Nakia, becomes a deadly rival. On the cover of *Black Panther* #24, artist ChrisCross depicts the sinister turn in their relationship. The hero holds his arms wide open, exposing his chest to the touch of a woman in a tight, wine-colored bodysuit. Unbeknownst to the Black Panther, she holds a serrated knife behind his back; with her eyes half-closed and her head in profile, her face is concealed from view. The block lettering on the cover exclaims, "HER NAME IS *Malice!*" (see fig. 2). Seductive imagery like this, which links physical intimacy with vulnerability to violence, conveys the impression that the Black Panther and his young female charges posed as much of a threat to one another as they offered mutual support.

Coates describes his discomfort with this background in an interview, characterizing the Dora Milaje concept as "a scantily clad troop of female bodyguards devoted to the Black Panther. It felt like a male fantasy, they seemed to me almost to be jewelry for the Black Panther" (quoted in Gray 2016). As the Black Panther's subordinate companions who hope to become his wife, the female attendants make a show of his command over their bodies, surrounding him as objects of an acquisitive desire. But as "jewelry," in Coates's phrasing, they reveal the character's heterosexuality to be excessively demonstrative and his investment in women as objects too literal. Throughout Priest's tenure as author of the text, however, the chaste courtship between the king and his women warriors reinforced the stability of the fictitious nation's traditions even as they faced new challenges. In the period preceding the launch of the series authored by Coates, the fictitious nation of Wakanda has suffered its first-ever invasion, and several crises of

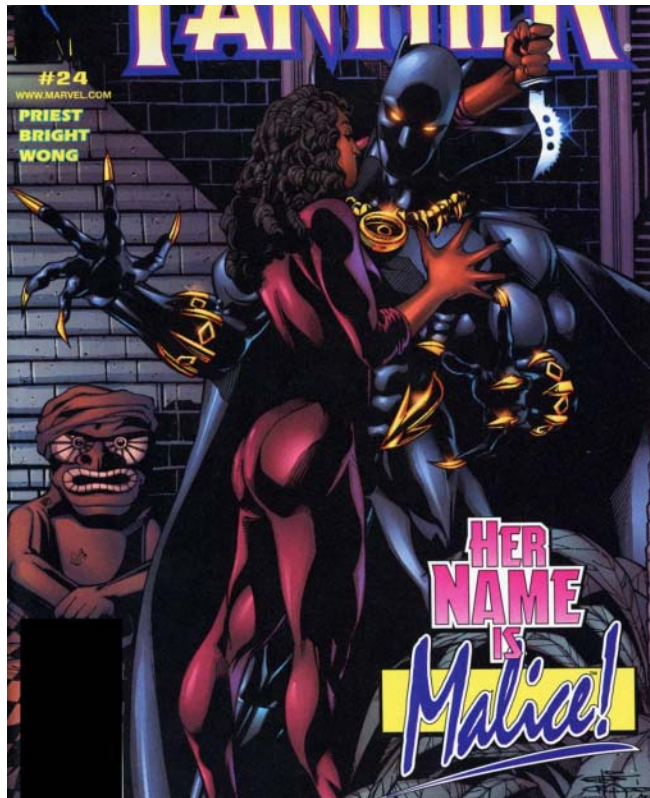


Figure 2 From Priest and Bright (2000), *Black Panther* #24

leadership have led its people to question their monarch for the first time. Coates takes advantage of this instability to articulate his ambivalence about the role of the Dora Milaje in the text:

Given what I know of men in the real world and what I know of men throughout history, that's a situation that's ripe for abuse. So it occurred to me that some of the Dora Milaje might have issues with that.

Sometimes people are willing to let go of parts of themselves or their desire to have certain rights if you can give them security. . . . You might have two people who love each other but can never be public about their relationship, who say, "Well, OK, I'm willing to take that loss for my country." But what happens when they don't even have a country anymore? (quoted in Micheline 2016)



Framing their burgeoning relationship as the exercise of a newfound freedom from overly constraining civic responsibilities situates Ayo and Aneka as participants in a new political order. Those who once practiced restraint in deference to their sovereign now turn against him and toward each other.

In Coates's *Black Panther* #1, Ayo and Aneka's manner of speaking to each other foreshadows the transformation of their relationship: they call one another "Beloved" before they kiss, reclaiming the sobriquet from their patriarch. They subsequently rename themselves Midnight Angels. Later, they proclaim their independence by insisting they are "cherished by no man, but 'adored' by the Goddess herself," fastening their "adored" status to the nation's religion rather than its ruler (Coates and Sprouse 2016). While no writers of the series suggest that repression is a pervasive characteristic of the fictitious nation's culture, Coates rationalizes the Dora Milaje's propriety as a function of military discipline. Portraying the characters as mutineers reclaiming their agency from the devices of the state amplifies their role as rivals to the Black Panther. Whereas they had once prioritized their desire for the nation's security over their desire to enjoy certain liberties, the disintegration of the former enables them to invest their energies in themselves, the people, rather than the king.

Though Coates appears to fashion the Dora Milaje's rebellion into a spectacular deviation from heteronormative conventions, closer examination of these figures' history in the text demonstrates their inherent propensity for the education of desire. They display their allegiance to the state and its king through the symbolic reproduction of heterosexuality—an arranged marriage defers consummation indefinitely. Priest introduced the Dora Milaje along with other new elements of the Black Panther mythos in 1998. At first glance, his contributions form an elaborate but superficial edifice of racialized exoticism around a figure who represents the universal ideals of the superhero: altruism, physical perfection, intellectual sophistication, and a strong moral compass. In a subplot that runs throughout his *Black Panther* series, however, Priest portrays the Dora Milaje as participants in coordinated spatial practices that substantiate the Black Panther's legitimacy as a national leader.

When T'Challa betrays his duties by pursuing Nakia, who was then one of his bodyguards, readers learn that the Dora Milaje are akin to



Figure 3 From Priest and Jusco (1999), *Black Panther* #6

deputies from Wakanda's many ethnic groups (Priest and Jusco 1999; see fig. 3). A brief glimpse into Nakia's past, in flashback form, shows her as a young girl fishing in shallow waters while counselors to the king stand above her in judgment, examining her from the banks of the stream to determine whether she can represent her people. After an extreme close-up in which an elder inspects Nakia's teeth to ensure she is "strong and of good stock," an elder proclaims, "In three summers I present her to the king." Nakia reappears as a bride adorned



**Figure 4** From Priest and Jusco (1999), *Black Panther* #6

with makeup, jewelry, and golden neck rings evocative of those worn by married Ndebele women in South Africa (Forbes 1998). T'Challa reassures her, "The role of the Dora Milaje is merely ceremonial. Your king shall not make demands of you"—a promise he will eventually break. The flashback insinuates that the Dora Milaje's relationships to the king represent alliances between disparate descent lines, fulfilling a purpose not entirely unlike marriages among the European aristocracy. The betrothal arrangement among villages, regions, and the seat of government sutures heterogeneous social formations within the fictitious country to its principal power center: a religion devoted to the Panther deity, for which Black Panther is the figurehead. Would-be rivals for local dominance are kept at bay through their communities' shared relationship to the throne. At one point, the king even inducts an African American woman with Wakandan lineage into the Dora Milaje

in order to secure her local relatives' allegiance to the throne (Priest and Calafiore 2001).

Rather than romanticizing rural girls' affiliation with a metropolitan nobleman like a Cinderella story, Priest emplots the erotic implications of the Dora Milaje's relationship to the Black Panther in a cautionary tale. Under the hallucinatory influence of a character representing the devil himself, the hero fantasizes about his estranged fiancée, an African American woman named Monica Lynne (Priest and Jusko 1999; see fig. 4). Through a sequence of vertically juxtaposed images illustrating a passionate kiss, readers witness the Black Panther unwittingly mistake Nakia for Lynne. The top panel shows only the lower halves of the two lovers' faces, removing the romantic encounter from time, space, and age. The pink lipstick on one of their faces is the only notable detail. The next image, below, shows them to be a man with a clean-shaven face and natural haircut kissing a woman wearing lingerie on a sofa. The two of them are replaced in the following image with figures taking up the exact same pose in a different setting: the man is recognizable to contemporaneous readers as T'Challa, wearing his trademark sunglasses, shaven head, and goatee, but the young woman wearing red lipstick is Nakia—they are in the back of his limousine. Although she is initially taken aback by T'Challa's astonished, embarrassed reaction to his own compromised judgment, Nakia relishes the prospect of attaining the forbidden love of her king. T'Challa dismisses Nakia from her office among the Dora Milaje, and her infatuation turns into an all-consuming jealousy, subsequently becoming malice.

The prerequisite for betrothal between T'Challa and his armed servants is their vow to love, honor, and obey him. In return, he offers the esteem of a nationally revered occupation and a promise not to make sexual advances toward them. Although the Black Panther is free to take other lovers and to marry, the duties of the Dora Milaje apparently preclude those liberties. The line forbidding sexual liaisons is drawn explicitly in structural terms rather than in terms of consent, and the power differential between the king and his companions bars sexual access, rather than permitting it. By introducing the Dora Milaje with a story that immediately flouts the taboos associated with their role, Priest aims to disabuse readers of the discomfiting connotations of their physical appearance. He provides an alternative explanation for these connotations and relegates the presumptions they invite to an exceptional situation that is met with strong opprobrium. Coates's

revisions suggest that his predecessor's work to contain the questionable aspects of the Dora Milaje were only partially successful; still, both writers position black women's empowerment as the staging ground for a conflict between value systems. Both authors enlist the female warriors in an affront against a metanarrative that identifies the African present with the European past.

### Amazons, Not Vestals

The phenomenon of *droit de seigneur*, *droit de cuissage*, or *prima noctis*, the feudal lord's privilege of sexual access to a vassal's bride, is the principal foil to Priest's representation of the Black Panther's Adored Ones. In his study of *prima noctis* abuse in European history, Alain Boureau (1998) finds little evidence in the historical record that attests to its actual occurrence. On the contrary, he notes that nineteenth-century critics of oppressive religious institutions marshaled accounts of this disgraceful exercise of power from the past in order to delegitimize their political opponents, who were, in their view, out of step with modernity. Peggy McCracken (2000, 354) summarizes Boureau's findings thus: "The historical use of the myth of *cuissage* is always about power and hierarchy: the lord's status in relation to his dependents; the church's legitimacy with respect to traditional and legal custom; the justice of the present in relation to the abuses of the (medieval) past." The disavowal of despicable habits of power as anachronisms, holdovers from a less-civilized era, is instrumental to the construction in history of a less-modern past that gives way to a modern present. Critics such as Samuel Ramos and Octavio Paz describe this demarcation in spatial as well as temporal terms by identifying how it positions the colonial periphery as backward, behind, or catching up in relation to the centers of metropolitan power (Alcoff 2007). This scheme subjects denizens of the global South to "an alienated relationship to their own temporal reality": "The temporal displacement of space, which causes the colonized person to be unable to experience their own time as the new and instead to see that 'now' as occurring in another space, is the result of a Eurocentric organization of time in which time is measured by the developments in technological knowledge, the gadget porn of iPads and Black-Berrys, and the languages in which that technological knowledge is developed" (85). The "Eurocentric organization of time" universalizes

milestones in the history of European societies, such as print literacy and market-based economic exchange, as the common itinerary with which all peoples should travel. By the same token, this organization of time constructs deviations from its normative itinerary that are actually taking place simultaneously, but located elsewhere in the world, as relics of a bygone era or even barbaric, uncivilized stages of development. The normativity of a Eurocentric trajectory for civilization organizes phenomena that are conventionally deemed social, political, and economic into indices of development and narratives of crisis. This same logic also annexes “private” considerations, from notions of hygiene, table manners, sexual practices, and gender expression to the notion of privacy itself and evaluates alternative configurations of these habits in terms of their proximity, resemblance, homology, or hierarchical subordination to dominant private/public regimes (Duggan 2015).

In view of this problematic, which Walter Mignolo theorizes as “colonial difference,” we might reconsider whether it is mere relativism or if it might in fact be critical to consider a plurality of distinct place- and time-specific explanations for the devotion of the king’s bodyguards (Alcoff 2007, 87). For Priest’s portrayal of the Dora Milaje’s betrothal to the king to appear modern without installing the European feudal past as its point of departure, it must disavow a version of modernity coterminous with coloniality. Of course, this gesture requires constructing an alternative frame of reference that is visible only through the prism of colonial difference.

If the form of the relationship between the Black Panther and daughters from disparate villages favors its feudal European twin, but Priest aims to convey an insistently different vision of subjects’ obedience to their king that would be free from sexual and class-based hierarchy, how might he achieve such a portrayal? The text would have to align itself with histories of desiring that are opaque when viewed through a Eurocentric lens, so that no matter how congruent its artifacts appear to be with oppressive practices, they still somehow signify alternatives.

The critique of the present on which the story of *Black Panther* is predicated is a refusal to internalize contradictions between colonizer and colonized, men and women, medieval and modern, and lords and vassals. These dichotomies function as homologies for the sexual exercise of power in European accounts of *cuissage*. I would therefore

argue that Priest is undertaking a complicated revisionist gesture in his portrayal of the women warriors betrothed to the king. The Dora Milaje pose an alternative to the colonial, medieval, and classical ideals their appearance approximates by disidentifying with their European analogues *and* their African precedents.

Many of the historical antecedents that make the Dora Milaje's significance legible use the word *Amazon* to describe troops of women who adhere to obscure martial traditions. Following Viviane Namaste's (1999) demystification of the term *queer* as metaphor and catachresis and J. Hillis Miller's (2007) disambiguation of the multiple significances of performativity, I propose that exploring the associations of the term *Amazon* in contexts like and unlike those of *Black Panther* may help us understand how it functions as an orienting device for the role of the Dora Milaje in the text. Like the term *Amazon*, the terms *black* and *queer* also prove imprecise but evocative as descriptors for the text's utopian orientation to modernity and its multiple geographies.

The nineteenth-century example cited for the etymology of *Amazon* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* illustrates the term's meaning through contrast. When used "in reference to the sexual habits of the Amazons," it connotes qualities that are opposite those of the word *vestal*, that is, "These hinds are amazons, not vestals."<sup>2</sup> Whereas both words have classical origins, they are markedly local. Like the word *homosexual*, abhorred by sexologists for its illegitimate origins as "a bastard term compounded of Greek and Latin elements," the *Amazon/vestal* pairing is an amalgamation (Somerville 2000, 32). One term hails from Greece and the other from Rome. The prototypical Amazons were equestrian archers from the Eurasian steppe; the women who inspired their stories were female members of a nomadic group rather than separatists (Worrall 2014). The vestal virgins' station in Rome, on the other hand, was sedentary, urban, noble, and sacrificial (Lutwyche 2012). The modern juxtaposition of these terms in the defining example comes from the travel writings of English physician George Henry Kingsley, included in a volume by the notorious eugenicist Sir Francis Galton. In his notes on his travels in the Scottish Highlands, Kingsley makes this comparison to describe a herd of deer consisting entirely of female members (hinds) spotted on a hunting trip: "Never by any chance is there a stag in their company, except possibly some effeminate hobbledohoy of a pricket, too weak-minded to take the risks of the hillside. It must, however, be understood that

these hinds are Amazons, not vestals, as is evident from the number of calves trotting about amongst them; unless, indeed, they are lady-superintendents of an educational institution for young stags” (Kingsley 1861, 137). We accrue species-defining characteristics in our own minds when we compare ourselves to nonhuman animals. Kingsley’s menagerie emblemizes the use of anthropocentric metaphors to posit the intrinsic humanity of certain expressions of subjectivity: erotic object choice, sexual subcultures, and gender expressions autonomous from sexual physiognomy. His extended metaphor reinforces species difference by using the subjunctive rather than indicative mood: of course, only a male human’s awkwardness can make him a “hobbledehoy,” and of course, only female humans join Amazon or vestal societies. This fantasy contains a kernel of insight: by fantasizing about, and thereby objectifying, sexuality among nonhumans, we make sense of the subjective and heterogeneous quality of all animals’ desiring practices (McHugh 2011, 115–18).

Invoking Greek Amazons and Roman vestals in nineteenth-century Scotland constructs a continuity between classical civilizations and extends it to modern paradigms of female homosocial desire. To use Sylvia Wynter’s (2003, 318) phrasing, this fictive continuity is overrepresented among “genres of being human.” Like the schemata in which figures like the Mulata Globeleza, Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire are embedded, modern Amazons often function as “porno-tropes” that objectify female sexuality and gender expression in racially specific terms (Spillers 1987; Soares 2012; Weheliye 2014). These porno-trope traditions literally and figuratively incarcerate women within systems of exploitation. Their echoes resound in Western hegemonic feminism, as well, when colonial and feminist discourses intersect to obfuscate the specificity of third world women’s oppression and alienate them from resources for survival and resistance (Hobson 2012, 140–41). An imaginative praxis that militates against the misnaming of black and decolonial desires would cultivate such resources in sacralized and popular traditions.

In *The Sexual Demon of Colonial Power*, Greg Thomas (2007, 22) writes, “While George Padmore once wrote in *Pan-Africanism or Communism?* (1956) that there was a choice to be made, Pan-Africanism can also be construed as an alternative to sexual imperialism.” Underlying this assertion is the recognition that Pan-Africanism can be, and has been, articulated in ways that recapitulate heteronormative



ideals. In the postcolonial era, the most pathetic of these discourses has decried homosexuality as an affront to “African values” or a symptom of decadence introduced by colonial elites or Islamic aristocrats (Epprecht 2008, 131–32). Meanwhile, the neocolonial desire to rescue “queer Africans in dire need” from AIDS, fundamentalism, and poverty reproduces meanings of sexual conformity and deviance across a broad swath of nations, cultures, and historical epochs (Nyong’o 2012, 46–47). Thomas scrutinizes the antihomophobic rhetoric of the African American and black British bourgeoisie for trafficking in similarly reductive accounts of African and black diasporic ideological tendencies. Pointedly, he writes, “This class of experts take [*sic*] scant pleasure in Black popular culture and its resistance to the white bourgeois culture of empire” (Thomas 2007, 142). I am less sympathetic to his arguments about where critics find pleasure than I am interested in extending his disidentification with black popular culture as a repository of anticolonial knowledge. While the insurgency of interventions performed in a mass medium like comics is questionable, the Dora Milaje’s uncanny correspondence with meanings of blackness that both affirm and defy colonial difference makes them a compelling figure for the alternatives to sexual imperialism we all desire.

The palette with which *Black Panther* paints desirable and desiring blackness as the foundation for a hypothetical national culture reflects a broad spectrum of anticolonial literature encompassing Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), Walter Rodney’s *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972), Audre Lorde’s “biomythography” (1982), and the Afrocentric school of thought inspired by Cheikh Anta Diop. While the latter body of scholarship is especially marginal in contemporary academic institutions, people of African descent across social classes have reflected on its epistemological significance in ways that do more than imbibing it in undiluted form. Vernacular texts that synthesize disparate currents in American, Africana, and postcolonial thought—like *Black Panther*, Milestone Media, black exploitation cinema, and so-called street lit—ensure that African pasts remain available to the many and varied desires of the black diasporic reading public (Brown 2000, 19–24). As critics, we can harness the insights of popular readership by reconciling its vulnerability to critique and co-optation with its potential to mobilize “radically revisionary epistemological formations that would attribute equivalent efficaciousness to myth, dream, and history” (Russell 2009, 60–61).

Precedents for the Dora Milaje can be found throughout the annals of precolonial African history, and they provide fodder for inspirational fiction and propaganda alike. Notably, author Jewelle Gomez catalogued a number of these figures to contest the whiteness of the feminist movement in science fiction in the 1980s (Carrington 2016, 239). The appearance of female aides-de-camp to a warrior-king occur in historical proximity to Priest's *Black Panther* comics, as well. In an affinity with *Black Panther* that may be undesirable, the late Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi's all-female personal security detail was alternately called the Amazonian Guard and Revolutionary Nuns, evoking members' dedication to the nation and citing their putative chastity as proof (Fulcher 1990; Kokan 1995). Qaddafi's advocacy for Pan-African and Arab unity, as well as his culpability for political violence, amplified the idiosyncrasy of his persona, including the spectacle of his female bodyguards (Falola, Morgan, and Oyenini 2012, 42–45).

In addition to this contemporary likeness, other touchstones for the Dora Milaje are embedded more deeply in the imaginations of readers acquainted with African American letters. Historicizing the trope as neither a dubious homage to a Pan-Africanist patriarch nor an invention cut from whole cloth requires a concerted effort to bridge the gap between black diasporic heritage and its roots. Desiring blackness has always required such fabulation. As Kevin Young (2012, 147–48) writes: “The remapping performed by the enslaved African and the freed artist—turning an Africa of memory, and even of recent experience, into utopia—was pitched against the notion of Africa as ‘no place’ in the European imagination. . . . Given that the imagination is where the Negro was first questioned and dismissed, why wouldn't black folks also choose the imagination as the site of this struggle and reclamation?” The same willful imagination enables us to construct queerness as an impetus for the recovery of improbable meanings. When Martínez (2013, 114) recommends restoring a sense of sociality to queerness, he highlights the integral role of such willful, context-bound self-definition in communities of color: “Queer people define themselves in relation to some of the same webs of cultural meaning that heterosexuals around them draw from. . . . In this sense, queers are engaged participants in the dialogic production of cultural meanings and therefore fundamentally part of the collective experience and imaginary.” We can understand why *Black Panther's* deployment of African imagery makes sense to readers if we reimagine blackness

as a space of plenitude in which longings that go unvoiced elsewhere in popular and academic mediations find some fulfillment. Sifting through the materials out of which readers construct race-conscious historical sensibilities is a necessary gesture toward achieving reciprocity between the “radically revisionary epistemological formations” (Russell 2009, 60–61) invoked by black and queer inquiries.

### **Wives of the Leopard**

The so-called Dahomey Amazons are among the most iconic representatives of military power in precolonial West Africa. The Kingdom of Dahomey (territorially situated in present-day Benin) intimidated its neighbors and rivals by subverting shared conventions of hierarchy, marriage, and violence, especially during the brutal 1890 colonial war with France that deposed its last king, Béhanzin (Hargreaves 1980). Whereas most African women participated in farming, culturally significant rituals, and the management of households, the female soldiers who guarded Dahomey’s king and his symbolic wives were notably autonomous.<sup>3</sup> They engaged in their own commerce during peacetime, and they wielded muskets as well as brand-new imported guns in battle, distinguishing them from many of their contemporaries (Bay 1998, 67–69). Like much earlier treatments of the mounted fighters of Scythia, contemporaneous accounts of Dahomey’s armed women identified them as exceptions to regional and global norms.

Insofar as its exceptional status reinscribes the norms of colonial thinking, invoking Dahomey as a precedent for Wakanda’s fictitious modernity is problematic. As Iris Berger (2003) notes, independence movements that set the agenda for politics and intellectual life in mid-twentieth-century African countries “tied their legitimacy in part to a reimagined past, both colonial and precolonial.” Women’s perspectives remained marginal to discourses on the formation of national identity. Although African pasts contain resources out of which contemporary readers might fashion a foothold in non-Western epistemologies of gender, race, and power, it can be dangerous to install the marker of colonial difference between an undesirable present and a usable past. It would be tempting to credit twentieth-century authors like Priest with retrieving the glory and egalitarianism of an African society from colonial repression by viewing the Dora Milaje as

a postcolonial interpretation of the Amazons of Dahomey. However, that gesture could circumscribe the project of imagining modernity within the boundaries of a conflict between African and European nations. Alternatively, we might appraise the factors that bring Dahomey's palace bodyguards to our attention as modern phenomena in their own right, according to a different understanding of modernity.

The Fon people of Dahomey are situated at an intersection of epistemological considerations important to queer theories and methodologies: for critics concerned with the reliability of various forms of evidence, for theories of how societies reproduce themselves through performance, and for notions of desire as a force that confers meaning—in excess of what can be explained by ideology—on the forms we turn to for interpretation. The kingdom of Dahomey's investment in communication with other polities through writing provides an archive of state interests and social practices that is comparable to its European counterparts in both form and scope. Several accounts from European travelers brought recollections of its history into metropolitan discourse before the late nineteenth-century "scramble for Africa." By the time the people who would be identified with Dahomey in the colonial era put their self-knowledge into forms (stories, linguistic conventions, rituals, and material culture) that were intelligible to their European contemporaries and to readers today, they had already accumulated data that suggest a form of modernity that was augmented, not initiated, by the colonial encounter.

The Dahomeyan state's precursors left traces of their history that referenced roots already firmly established by the seventeenth century for aspects of their shared identity, such as place-names, origin myths, and mnemonics that were communicated to outsiders. One visitor recalls a story of the state's founders: "Danh was killed, and the foundation stone of a palace was built over his corpse. The palace was called Danhomen, *i.e.*, on Danh's belly. . . . This took place in 1625, when the Ffons [*sic*] changed their names to Dahomans" (Skertchly 1874, 85–87). During a period in which they understood their own history to be one of uninterrupted continuity, their neighbors passed into and out of the territoriality of different nations (Monroe 2007, 349–53). To the west was the homeland of Dahomey's founders, which later became the German colony of Togo, and to the east was Yorubaland, including the Oyo Empire that once dominated them

politically and financially (Law 1991, 154–66). The kingdom maintained trade with the Islamic world as well, implicating Dahomey in a mercantile and political system that antedated the transatlantic slave trade (Law 1990).

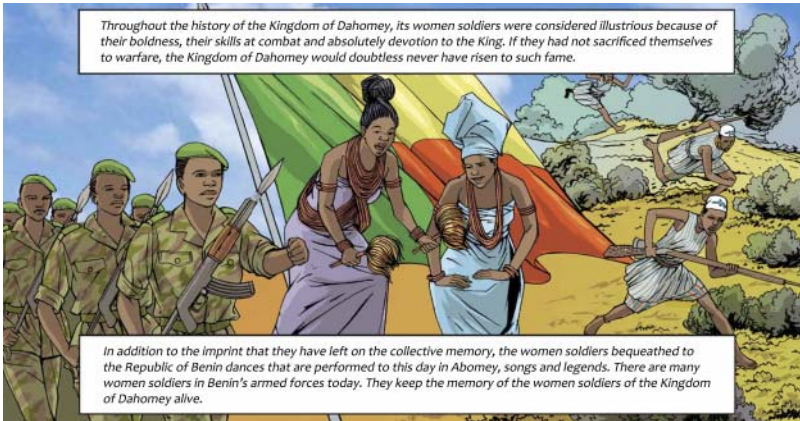
Perhaps the most distinguishing characteristic of Dahomey's social formation was its bureaucracy, made legible in discursive and material terms. Research that synthesizes oral and written sources, along with architectural evidence, attests to complex structures linking the person of the king and his office, his several classes of wives, the women who provided their armed security, the elder female intermediaries through whom men were compelled to address the king at court, and the vast palaces in several cities where thousands of women resided (Morton-Williams 1993, 110–11). While references to various linguistic and cultural traditions inform the representation of the Dora Milaje in *Black Panther*, the Amazons of Dahomey are a compelling example because they present the clearest opportunity to appeal to a precolonial past as the pretext for the narrative's rendition of an African setting. Their trace in the historical record grounds contemporary claims to a concrete utopian orientation to time and space.

The features I cite to characterize Dahomey's modernity are important neither because they illustrate the presence of conventions resembling those of European nations nor because they establish that the state was at an appropriately mature stage in its development when it began to interface with colonial power. Rather, Dahomey's overtures toward its colonial counterparts included its representations of itself *to itself*, which Ferguson (2003, 60) frames in Foucauldian terms as “the internal discourse of the institution’—the one it employed to address itself, and which circulated among those who made it function.” These self-representations, including the reputations attained by the armed women in their ranks, attest to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Fon peoples' centuries-long desire to exercise agency over their own and their counterparts' perceptions of their respective places in the world. Reanimating their vision of modernity as part of a utopian intervention in popular culture is a “grounding” gesture, in the sense that Walter Rodney (1969, 60–64) coined the term to describe the work of black diasporic intellectuals. Grounding, viewed as the orientation to world-making that makes the utopian aspirations of Priest and Coates concrete, is “the idea that for people of African descent, connecting with the historical and present conditions of African peoples throughout

the Diaspora, rather than aligning with the imperialists, could provide the trust and necessary insight for elites of African descent to lead their own people” (Young 2015).

*Black Panther*'s historically resonant renditions of African Amazons are not unique in contemporary culture. Indeed, another mythmaking endeavor built on imagery from precolonial Benin also utilizes the medium of comics. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has produced a series of educational modules on women in African history that includes a comic book on the women soldiers of Dahomey. In this narrative, the “elite troops of women soldiers” exit history with the French colonial conquest of the 1890s (Serbin, Joubaud, and Masioni 2014).

The final page of the comic, illustrated by Pat Masioni, is a single frame juxtaposing three sets of black women who could easily be surrogates for the Dora Milaje (see fig. 5). The centerpiece of the panel features two women in colorful but undecorated wrappers, one with a headscarf, dancing before the Republic of Benin's waving flag. They are flanked on each side by female soldiers. On the left, a group marches in formation wearing camouflage fatigues and carrying bayoneted assault weapons, and on the right, a woman in the foreground strides barefoot on a hillside along with her comrades-in-arms, all of whom bear rifles and wear uniforms resembling an 1851 illustration of a female soldier under King Gezo of Dahomey (see fig. 6). The caption reads: “In addition to the imprint that they have left on the collective memory, the women soldiers bequeathed to the Republic of Benin dances that are performed to this day in Abomey, songs and legends. There are many women soldiers in Benin's armed forces today” (Serbin, Joubaud, and Masioni 2014, 21). By presenting a dreamlike juxtaposition of women from three hypothetical moments in the “collective memory” of anyone who becomes familiar with Benin's history, the UNESCO comic promulgates an abstract utopia. It enlists readers in furtherance of an educational mission articulated with other UN interventions, like the *General History of Africa* and the International Decade for People of African Descent. These discursive interventions are linked with *Black Panther* comics by the way they mobilize historical references around the aim of desiring blackness. Fictitious and historical texts alike deploy black bodies to new frontiers of the imagination without ever fully extricating us from the prior arrangements that make our images available.



**Figure 5** An educational comic. From Sylvia Serbin, Edouard Joubeaud, and Pat Masioni (2014), *The Women Soldiers of Dahomey*



**Figure 6** Frontispiece illustration in Frederick E. Forbes (1851), *Dahomey and the Dahomans: Being the Journals of Two Missions to the King of Dahomey, and Residence at His Capital, in the Year 1849 and 1850*

### Out of Utopia

Wakanda simulates certain hypotheses about the impact of colonialism by posing a counterfactual example of an African nation that was never colonized. After a fashion, it approximates the namesake of

Thomas More's *Utopia*, the word *outopia*, designating "no place." But the reason Wakanda corresponds to no place is a consequence of its relation to actually existing places: it represents a fantasy collectively authored by a social formation as a means of addressing the unmet needs of our particular historical circumstances. Ernst Bloch marked this specificity as the distinction between a concrete utopia and an abstract utopia (Muñoz 2009, 3–4). In its steadfast rejection of the here and now, *Black Panther* indulges the desires of people of African descent to envision ourselves in an alternative relation to modernity. The outwardly anachronistic appearance of the Dora Milaje gestures toward a history of sexuality that is more desirable than those that have been written.

A critical orientation to the text that accepts racially specific desires as the basis for its speculation demands that we locate African sites on the itinerary of queer futurity and other utopian agendas that might pass them by. African American speculation has always journeyed through diaspora on its way to divining new forms of black life and politics, and new forms of desiring blackness emerge through the same process. The new black queer studies reclaims "histories of many black lesbians and gay men traveling the world as they figured out their hungers, their desires, their ways of being possible" (Macharia 2014). So, too, does Afrofuturism. When authors like George Schuyler (*Black Empire*; 1936), Amiri Baraka (*A Black Mass*; 1966), Ishmael Reed (*Mumbo Jumbo*; 1972), and Octavia Butler (*Parable of the Sower*; 1993) mine the annals of Nilotic, Congo Basin, and Swahili Coast societies to craft satirical and affecting fictions, the overture to the reading public is double-voiced. First, modeling the settings of short stories and novels on selective readings of an eclectic archive allows these authors to establish a dialogue with knowledge of the transnational that cuts across colonial difference and undermines distinctions between institutionalized cultural conventions and everyday life. Concomitantly, to the extent that a counterfactual setting like Wakanda delinks speculations about history from the task of making truth claims, it channels this will to speculate into the task of inspiration.

Clothing the Black Panther in a heroic discourse on the precolonial African past and disidentifying with its present in order to conjure a vision of its future is not necessarily a rational way to mobilize affinities between actually existing Africans and black Americans. In its irrational gestures that transcend antinomies like the overrepresentation of



coloniality within the narratives that define modernity, desiring blackness revalorizes a longing for ways of being black that belong to “the no-longer conscious, that thing or place that may be extinguished but not yet discharged in its utopian potentiality” (Muñoz 2009, 30).

By situating *Black Panther*'s invocations of and divergences from potential models for the role of the Dora Milaje as part of a concerted effort to imagine modernity otherwise, I am arguing that the desires we might read as queer within the text are already spoken for—or already arranged—by the term *black*. In light of this consideration, a queer orientation to black knowledge production will always amount to an augmentation of motion already in process. Blackness is not a discrete quantity; it is a desired coherence, a hypothetical trajectory between past and future. Querying a text that represents historically determined forms of this desire, including black nationalisms and other race-conscious world-making endeavors, provides a point of departure for understanding the concrete utopian ambitions of comics. By linking *Black Panther* to the unfinished projects of queering comics and queer futurity, I am commending it as an example of the strivings and failures that Muñoz identified in “the interface between an engagement with the no-longer-conscious and the not-yet-here” (87). Various described as an unconscious, a repertoire, or “the wake,” this symbolic interface is replete with unnamed possibilities for readers and critics concerned about what it means to identify with and desire blackness (Sharpe 2016, 2).

The hesitancy that separates my conceptualization of desiring blackness from the queer approaches to *Black Panther* that we can anticipate in the months and years to come is by no means a contention that the text, its authors, and their implicatedness are *not* queer. It's a suggestion that they are not *yet*. We may never touch queerness. As Muñoz writes, “I suggest that holding queerness in a sort of ontologically humble state, under a conceptual grid in which we do not claim to always already know queerness in the world, potentially staves off the ossifying effects of neoliberal ideology and the degradation of politics brought about by representations of queerness in contemporary popular culture” (2009, 22). Approaching popular texts with foreknowledge of their amenability to queer readings may draw us closer to the utopian potential they have to offer. At the same time, we should know that “because this world is already in place . . . queer moments, where things come out of line, are fleeting” (Ahmed 2006,

565). The “structuring and educated mode of desiring” (Muñoz 2009, 1) that informs my orientation to comics seeks to reconcile utopian ambitions with humble critical designs.

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### Notes

- 1 Holland, Ochoa, and Tompkins (2014, 396) coin the phrase “cathectic and world-making behaviors” to comment on the way forms of deviance associated with the visceral are “already politicized as points of biopolitical, territorial, economic, and cultural intervention.” I cite these descriptors to underscore how politicized habits of desiring characterize blackness as a mode of being and impetus for action. Blackness coincides with queerness as a “structuring and educated mode of desiring” in the sense articulated by Muñoz (2009, 1) in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*.
- 2 *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “Amazon.” OED Online, June 2017, Oxford University Press, [oed.com/view/Entry/6077](http://oed.com/view/Entry/6077) (accessed October 8, 2017).
- 3 “Wives of the leopard” is a translation of *Ahosi*, an honorific utilized in the ethnographic research of Edna Bay (1998) and Peter Morton-Williams (1993) on women in Dahomey.

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